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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 MUSCAT 001577

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/ARPI, NEA/PPD, NEA/P, IIP/G/NEA

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [KPAO](#) [SOCI](#) [KISL](#) [MU](#)

SUBJECT: OMAN ONLINE: CONSTITUTIONS, COLONIALISM, AND CACOPHONY

1. Summary: The Omani Internet message board "al-Sablah" is the liveliest and most comprehensive Arabic-language forum for political and social discourse in the country, touching on issues and personalities rarely addressed in the conventional media. While not totally free, nor wholly reflective of Omani public opinion, this popular site nevertheless offers a worthwhile window into the hot topics and unvarnished views of the day. This edition of Oman Online contains the following topics:

- Iraq's Draft Constitution
- Oman's History In East Africa
- Loud Imams In Salalah
- Sheikh Khalifa's Gift To Oman

End summary.

The Genuine Article

2. The entire text of the draft Iraqi constitution was posted for al-Sablah's readers, and a number of forum members (360 hits and 20 responses) took the opportunity to criticize the document, article by article. "This so-called constitution was written by American Jews, in consultation with the Israeli government, just before the occupation - and was approved by the 2002 London conference of Iraqi opposition leaders under the supervision of U.S. Ambassador Khalilzad," claimed one writer. Another chimed in, "Constitutions cannot be drafted under duress or occupation. For a constitution to be successful, the drafters need absolute freedom and security, both of which were totally lacking in Iraq."

3. Although some respondents supported the referendum, the strongest comments came from those opposed to the constitution. "Anybody who thinks a unified Iraq will result from this ratification is mistaken. There will just be a number of small states in conflict, with different languages, the same as happened in South Yemen during the British occupation 150 years ago," noted one contributor. Remarked another, "This constitution is an example of 'Divide and Rule.' Curse the drafters of this constitution and those who have paved the way for it."

Imperial Hubris?

4. Oman's imperial history in East Africa surfaced as a topic on the Internet message board, generating 1,500 hits and 34 responses. A debate ensued over Oman's legacy in the region, with contributors citing slavery and Islam as the Sultanate's two main exports. "The majority of Omanis who immigrated to Africa did so with the purpose of establishing trade and commerce. Unfortunately, these intentions caused a lot of problems. Rather than bringing over science or culture, the Omanis brought carnation plants to Zanzibar in the hope of making money," offered one writer. Another lamented, "Slavery was the hallmark of the Omanis during their rule of Zanzibar. This type of human trade is abhorrent to Islam in particular and humanity as a whole."

5. Others defended Oman's record: "The Omanis were certainly interested in trade and expansionism, but that doesn't mean they neglected the mission of Islam. The good reputation of the Muslims always preceded the conquering forces. The people of East Africa were influenced by the nobility of Islam, and that is why they still embrace it willingly today."

The Sound And The Fury

6. Continuing on the theme of Islam, one al-Sablah member alleged that an imam in Salalah had turned up the volume on his mosque loudspeakers to intolerable levels. "In order not to cause problems for both children and sick people, I call upon the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs to intervene and keep the volume at a moderate level," continued the author. 468 people viewed the topic, and 15 responded. "There is an abundance of mosques in our country," began one writer, "and you don't need loudspeakers to find them to pray." Another said, "There are non-Muslims living near the mosque, and we have to respect their privacy and feelings." Others disagreed: "What a beauty it is

that our children wake up to a voice saying `God is Great.' It is strange, especially during Ramadhan, to hear someone say that the broadcasting of prayers is a disturbance."

Road To Nowhere

17. In a popular topic that provoked 1,135 hits and 41 responses, an author asked "What happened to the RO 100 million gift (roughly \$260 million) from the ruler of the UAE (Shaykh Khalifa) that was supposed to go towards building a dual carriageway (highway) from Nizwa to Salalah?" Others took up the call: "We heard from Dubai and Abu Dhabi TV that the gift was intended for the construction of a dual carriageway, but the Omani press has ignored the issue. Is this deliberate, because the money has been put to other uses?"

18. The conversation then turned to a critique on the tenure of Ahmed Abd al-Nabi Macki, the Minister of National Economy. "I want to ask the president of the UAE if he ever heard Macki saying that the funds would be shifted to other destinations," declared one respondent. Another asked, "Who is Macki, and on what basis can he dispose of Sheikh Khalifa's donation to the Omani people?" Others became more emotional: "Isn't this a suitable time for this man to step down and stop his policies that increase the agony of the Omani people every day? Doesn't he feel the suffering of his countrymen? The answer is no, a thousand times."

BALTIMORE